



Second in a series

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‘THIS IS WHAT IT’S LIKE TO DIE’

Strip mines present unique dangers to workers

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TWILIGHT — At about 5:30 a.m. on Sept. 17, 2003, Rodney Sheets and four coworkers piled into a van in the parking lot of Progress Coal’s Twilight MTR Surface Mine in Boone County.

Daylight was still more than an hour and a half away. The workers needed to get into the pit by 6 a.m. and start moving coal for Progress’ parent company, Massey Energy.

Matthew Adkins, the van’s driver, dropped off Glen Akers at his dozer and Lawrence Fox at his rock truck.

Then, Adkins went to deliver paper towels and toilet paper to Stan Mills, another rock truck driver.

Adkins pulled up and parked below the ladder on the right-front side of the rock truck. From his seat 16 feet off the ground, Mills had no way to know the van was there. Inside such trucks — with tires twice as tall as a Ford Ranger pickup — drivers can’t see anything for 60 feet in front of their trucks and for nearly a football field’s length off to the right.

Mills started his truck, and drove forward.

“Whoa, Stan,” Adkins said over the mine radio.

Edmond Dotson, watching from the cab of his rock truck across the pit, grabbed his radio. “Stop, Stan,” he hollered. “Stop. Stop.”

It was too late. Mills’ truck hit the van. The van rolled over onto its roof. It was crushed under the truck’s bumper, frame and right tire.

Sheets and another worker, William Birchfield, were killed. Somehow, Adkins survived.

“All I heard was metal crunching and glass breaking,” Adkins recalled later. “My exact thought was, ‘This is what it’s like to die.’”

Birchfield and Sheets didn’t have to die, federal investigators later concluded.

A strobe light on top of the van was broken, investigators found. If it had worked, it could have warned Mills the van was parked in his blind spot, investigators found.

Cameras meant to show Mills his blind spot did not turn on automatically when he shifted into drive, investigators also found.

‘That’s a safe job’

Twenty-three years earlier, Rodney Sheets was working underground at Westmoreland Coal’s Ferrell Mine No. 17 at Uneeda.

At about 3:30 a.m. on Nov. 7, 1980, an explosion tore through the mine. Five miners were killed.

Not long after that, Sheets got a surface mine job.

“He just wanted to get out from underground,” his widow, Tamara Sheets, recalled. “We thought: Surface mining and a job as a driller, that’s a safe job.”

As mining jobs go, it probably was. Last year, surface mines produced two-thirds of the nation’s coal, but accounted for just two of the 22 coal mine deaths. Over the last 10 years, surface mine workers accounted for 22 percent of the coal miners killed on the job nationwide.

Every year, miners at underground mines are three times more likely to be injured than those employed by surface mines.

But strip mines — especially mountaintop removal mines across Appalachia — are hardly safe places, according to a six-month Sunday Gazette-Mail investigation.

Mountaintop removal mines use huge amounts of explosives to blast off entire ridges and uncover coal seams. Miners operate drills and shovels on narrow ledges. They are often working just



Photos courtesy U.S. MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH ADMINISTRATION



William Birchfield

Miners Rodney Sheets and William Birchfield were killed when the van they were riding in was run over by a huge rock truck at a Massey Energy mine in September 2003. Sheets and Birchfield might not have died if the warning strobe light on their van had worked, or if blind-spot cameras installed by Massey had turned on automatically when the truck was put in gear. In September, the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration agreed to settle a case with Massey over the 2003 accident for about \$30,000, half of the fines originally assessed.



Rodney Sheets

below unstable walls of rock and dirt called highwalls.

Monster trucks prowl haulroads and hillsides, mixed in with smaller trucks and vans that often can’t be seen or heard until it’s too late.

Appalachian strip mines account for one-fifth of the nation’s strip mined-coal. But over the last decade, they accounted for 75 percent of the nation’s surface mine deaths, according to the Gazette-Mail investigation.

Nationwide, 71 strip miners died on the job between 1996 and 2005, an average of about seven per year.

Like their counterparts at underground mines, most of those miners didn’t have to die. Sixty-two of the U.S. strip mine deaths — 88 percent of the total — could have been avoided if existing safety rules had been followed, the Gazette-Mail’s investigation found.

Among the death toll:

▲ On June 28, 2002, Willie Holmes Jr., 49, backed his 50-ton haul truck over a berm at Lone Mountain Processing Inc.’s coal waste dump in Lee County, Va. The truck rolled, and then slid into the impoundment. Rescuers had to dig

Holmes’ body out of the mud with an excavator.

Investigators found that the haulroad safety berm was saturated with water. It was too soft to warn truck drivers who hit it that they were nearing the edge of the road.

▲ On Aug. 13, 2002, drill operator Edward Schall walked off a highwall cliff at Mack Leasing’s Gastown Strip Pit No. 2 in Armstrong County, Pa.

It had rained during the night. The mine site was covered with a blanket of fog. Schall didn’t have a flashlight with him.

Investigators said that the mine site should have been lighted, and that a safe path should have been provided to the work site.

▲ On Sept. 9, 2003, miners Brad Beavers and Charley Madsen were using their pickup trucks to haul an electric shovel up a hill at RAG Coal West’s Ayr Mine outside Gillette, Wyo.

Beavers’ truck got stuck in the mud. Madsen tied his truck to Beavers’ with a nylon rope attached to a hook welded onto a rear hitch. When Madsen started to drive, the hook jerked loose,

flew back and smashed through Beavers’ windshield, hitting him in the head.

Investigators found that the hooks were not properly attached to the trucks.

Repeating the past

Earlier this year, on Feb. 1, bulldozer operator Paul Moss was killed when his dozer hit a natural gas line at Massey Energy’s Black Castle strip mine in Boone County. Federal investigators found that Massey management had directed Moss to work in the area of a known gas line without actually locating the line and marking it.

Six years earlier, on May 18, 2000, the same thing happened to a front-end loader operator at Addington Mining Inc.’s Dial’s Branch Mine in Pike County, Ky.

Michael E. Moore was loading a bucket of rocks and dirt into a truck, when the bucket of his loader hit a gas line. The gas ignited, causing a fire that engulfed the loader.

MSHA investigators found that the company did not put up warning signs to show the exact location of the gas

line, and that mine maps posted at the mine office did not depict the gas line.

On Feb. 20, 2002, bulldozer operator Allen E. Greger, 49, was killed when a large slab of mudstone fell from a base of a highwall onto his dozer at Arch Coal Inc.’s Black Thunder Mine in Campbell County, Wyo.

Just one month earlier at the same mine, miner Les Butts was paralyzed when a large rock fell on the vehicle he was operating at the mine.

After Butts was injured, MSHA ordered Arch Coal to come up with a better plan to prevent rocks from falling on miners. The plan was due on Feb. 25, five days after Greger was killed.

Similar accidents have occurred in the Appalachian coalfields.

On Jan. 7, 1999, highwall drill operator Alan Hargis was crushed by a falling rock at No. 1 Contractor Inc.’s Stony Point Mine in Hopkins County, Ky.

MSHA investigators found that unsafe highwall conditions were not promptly fixed, and that Hargis was operating his drill with the cab on the highwall side of the vehicle, putting himself at greater risk in case of a rock fall.

On Nov. 20, 2004, the same thing happened to highwall excavator operator Kevin Lupardous at Massey Energy subsidiary Endurance Mining’s Red Cedar Surface Mine in Boone County.

MSHA investigators found that Massey’s mine maps showed that abandoned workings were located “along the entire length of the highwall.” The highwall was unstable, but even after parts of it collapsed, company officials did not develop a plan for working safely in the unstable areas, MSHA found.

‘That just isn’t going to work’

The day before Sheets and Birchfield were killed by the rock truck, miner John Fox noticed that the strobe light on the Twilight Mine’s portal van still hadn’t been fixed.

“The light hadn’t worked for several months,” Fox said.

MSHA investigators found that there had been two similar accidents at the Twilight Mine, in September and November 2002.

MSHA cited Massey for not completing a proper safety check of the rock truck and not properly training its employees.

Agency inspectors also cited Massey for the van’s broken strobe light, and for the faulty blind-spot camera system.

Massey had voluntarily installed the camera system, but MSHA found that the camera for the right-hand side of the truck was broken. Also, the front-view camera was not set up to come on automatically when the driver shifted into forward gear. If it had been, Mills might have seen the van.

A camera with automatic front-view would have cost an additional \$600 in parts and \$70 for installation, said Frank Foster, safety coordinator for Massey Coal Services.

“Those systems should not require a driver to manually push a button to select which camera view is showing,” said researcher Todd Ruff, who has studied camera use at strip mines for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. “That just isn’t going to work.”

On Sept. 13, 2006 — four days before the third anniversary of the accident — MSHA agreed to a settlement that cut Massey’s total fines in half, from \$68,000 to \$30,600.

For one citation, MSHA dropped the fine from \$28,000 to \$12,000 when Massey argued that the rock truck driver was at fault for not making sure his path was clear before moving forward.

The settlement document notes that the driver “was a rank-and-file employ-

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